

Defense Bill Signed into Law Contains Provisions Sought by Bilirakis

WASHINGTON (Jan. 30) — On Monday, President Bush signed into law (P.L. 110-181) the \$696 billion Fiscal Year 2008 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which authorizes defense-related funding for the fiscal year 2008, including several provisions specifically advocated for by Florida Congressman Gus M. Bilirakis (R-Palm Harbor).

"I am tremendously pleased that this legislation includes provisions addressing issues for which I pushed hard during my first year in Congress," said Bilirakis, a member of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, who introduced legislation on each of these issues. "When I authored legislation on a 3.5 percent military pay raise, the creation of a single point of healthcare assistance for wounded warriors and the improved eligibility of benefits for America's veterans, it was my hope that they would be signed into law one way or another."

The NDAA makes retroactive to Jan. 1, 2008, a 3.5 percent pay increase for troops. In April 2007, Bilirakis introduced H.R. 2027, which would ensure a minimum 2008 military pay increase of 3.5 percent. "Closing the military-civilian pay gap to make certain our military men and women are properly compensated for their hard work and sacrifice is a high priority of mine," said Bilirakis, who plans to introduce another bill this year that would call for an additional half percent pay increase in Fiscal Year 2009.

Also included in the NDAA, were Congressman Bilirakis's efforts to improve the eligibility of benefits for America's veterans, specifically the issue of "concurrent receipt" and Combat-Related Special Compensation (CRSC). The legislation authorizes disabled retirees, who are considered 100 percent disabled by the virtue of being unemployable, to receive full concurrent receipt of military retired pay and disability compensation retroactive from Jan. 1, 2005. It also begins providing CRSC to all service members eligible for retirement pay who have a service-connected disability.

Aside from urging his House colleagues to keep these provisions in the NDAA during House-Senate negotiations, Bilirakis introduced several bills in the first session of the 110th Congress that addresses the concurrent receipt and CRSC issues. In January 2007, Bilirakis introduced the Combat-Related Special Compensation Act, H.R. 89, which eliminates the 20-year requirement for the CRSC program. He also introduced H.R. 303, which expands concurrent receipt to those rated less than 50 percent disabled.

Finally, the NDAA included a provision that creates a wounded warrior resource center to provide wounded soldiers, their families and primary physicians with a single point for healthcare assistance and for reporting difficulties with healthcare service. Bilirakis had offered an amendment adopted by the House earlier last year that would have created a Department of Defense-wide Ombudsman to perform a similar function of the resource center.